

How to help children learn

- **Try to see things from their point of view.** Understanding how children see the world will help you to help them as they learn.
- **Let children be children.** A skilled five year old grows from a busy four year old, a curious three year old, a cuddled two year old, an adventurous one year old and a communicative baby.
- **Be a playful companion.** You can enjoy childhood with the children as well.
- **Feelings matter** – both the children's emotions and your own are part of any situation with young children. It is very helpful to be aware of your own moods as well as the children's when enjoying yourself with them and during difficult moments.
- **Don't expect to be perfect.** Everyone does something they don't mean sometimes. Children can be forgiving as long as we are thoughtful most of the time and are ready to say sorry when we should.



Babies – learning starts from the first day

Jennie Lindon

Taking care of a baby is tiring work, with a lot of feeding, nappies and broken nights. When you are exhausted, it can be harder to notice that a baby is really alert to what you do and say. It can be even harder if you have been told, 'Babies don't do anything' or 'They're not very interesting at first'.

But if you watch and listen to babies, you soon realise that people who say these things are missing so much.

Babies are learning from their first days. In fact, their brains are working before they are born, especially on seeing and hearing. You would not think there was much to see or listen to while babies are still developing in the womb. But by the end of pregnancy, light definitely filters through to babies – and the womb is a noisy place.

Human babies are vulnerable. After they are born, they need good care just to survive. They cannot stagger to their feet like a newborn calf. But what they are missing in get-up-and-go, they make up for in brain power.

For instance:

- Newborns are really interested in human faces and voices. Some clearly recognise their mother's voice. Babies are keen to be part of the social scene long before they produce 'proper' words.
- Very young babies are able to copy the expression on your face. Sometimes they will even produce that expression a day later. They have remembered.

Practice makes perfect

Babies learn through repetition and by trying out lots of different ways to do the same thing. They actually build up connections in the brain with their keen practice in making trills of sound, playing with their toes or learning to crawl.

The world is all new to babies. So, in the first year of life, they find out that a toy dropped over the side of their high chair will make the same sound each time, but a cloth bib flutters down and does not make much sound when it touches the ground.

They like to have the same song from you or a peek-a-boo game with their older brother. This enthusiasm for 'again!' is spot on for their learning. Repeating the same thing helps them remember because it makes the unknown more familiar. A baby's broad smile shows you she knows that a particular hand gesture you make means you are going to do 'Round and round the garden'. And happy repetition can help older children in the family too. A four-year-old big brother will be thrilled when 'my baby' starts the peek-a-boo game by waving the cloth in the air.

Babies learn to use hands and mouth to explore. They put interesting things in their mouth because the nerve endings there are the most sensitive in their body. It makes no sense to try to stop them. Just make double sure that anything they can reach is safe to suck. Babies use their current favourite action on anything. Holding, staring and mouthing are soon followed by tapping, shaking, poking or rubbing. Some actions, like dropping or throwing, can grow into a funny game with you or an older child as the fetcher.

Babies learn while you care for them

You do a great deal of care for babies so it is useful that they are keen to learn while you are feeding or changing them. Of course, you need to keep them safe on the changing mat or in your arms for breast or bottle feeding. But at the same time they are busy watching you while you feed them. They feel cherished by you and you are their safe place. Older babies want to use their physical skills to hold a cup or wave a spoon. Soon they will share in their dressing – although a hat is as likely to be taken off as put on.

They listen to your words or singing as you change nappy and wet clothes. Babies as young as three months old can already join in through simple turn-taking. You say something and pause. They come back with sounds and gestures, then they pause. Amazingly, babies have already worked out the basics of a conversation. You help when you:

- are close to babies and make sure you have their attention
- use ordinary words, keeping it simple, with short sentences
- repeat what you say, with slight variations
- are expressive with your tone and facial expression.

Simple toys are best

There is a wide selection of baby toys in the shops. Some play resources are as good as ever: rattles, simple stackers, tough picture books, good quality bricks, dolls and teddies and pull-along toys. But the best toy ever invented for babies is still you. A playful, attentive adult comes equipped with a voice, eyes, ears, hands, a lap and a memory of what the baby liked yesterday.

Some plastic baby toys and kits are advertised as essential for early learning or for brain development. Take these advertisements with a large pinch of salt, because many are untrue. The early months and years are very important. But babies build their own brains through their happy early conversations with you and by playing with simple materials. We live in a high-tech society now, but babies remain saucepan and cardboard box people.

Babies' toys and the surrounding area need to be kept clean enough. But baby toys do not all have to be plastic. They certainly do not all have to be in bright colours or make funny noises. Babies like pastels sometimes and the look and feel of wood or soft materials. They do not want everything to make a noise.

Once babies can sit up without support, they have their hands free and a whole new world of play opens up. They learn from simple toys that they can move about, shake, put into and take out of larger containers. And you do not have to buy everything. Make up a treasure basket with a range of items that are not conventional toys. You could have a wooden spoon, a metal tea strainer, a large cotton reel, a soft cloth ball, a bath sponge or the old-fashioned dolly wooden clothes peg. Check that anything is safe to go in a baby's mouth and has no rough edges. Sit close by and watch – but you do not have to say anything unless the baby is clearly inviting your comment.

Babies have a strong sense of musical pattern and rhythm.

- They tune into songs and nursery rhymes. They love to watch and listen – and babies will never criticise your singing voice! They soon join in with their own tuneful sounds and any gestures that go with a rhyme.
- Babies benefit from hearing a range of music and not only songs designed for children. Enjoy together a mix of pop or dance, classical or traditional music (whatever you like).
- Babies like being danced around in your arms. When older babies can lean with their hands against a firm item of furniture, they will jiggle to music with a good beat.

Babies love books, pictures and simple storytelling through a book or a nursery rhyme. The best way to introduce babies to really, really early literacy is through enjoying a book on your lap. Look together, read the story or make up a simple storyline to a good picture book. Board or cloth books will survive the inevitable chewing. You can buy some books and use the local library. Avoid wasting your money on plastic toys that claim to support early literacy because the alphabet is fixed to the surface. Babies are nowhere near understanding the ideas of an alphabet and will not be for years!

Babies need to be able to move

Young babies want to use all their physical skills. Watch how they concentrate on looking, reaching out and then grasping something of interest. Of course, they have no idea of danger at all, so you need to make sure that whatever they can grab is safe. Babies put serious effort into learning how to move on their own and many do this through crawling. Watch their determination as they move from rocking to and fro towards perfecting a workable crawl. The top of their body is stronger than the lower half. So quite a few babies go backwards the first time but they do not give up. Not all babies move themselves by crawling. Some do an efficient bottom-shuffle and some do half-crawl, half-shuffle.

Babies need plenty of opportunities to practise their chosen gymnastics. They cannot learn if they spend too much time in a baby seat or buggy. They need a safe space for moving around. Often the best area is on a comfortable floor, with you as a playful companion who is happy to be used as a climbing frame. Babies are keen to use any skill that they have discovered. Once they have got the idea of crawling or cruising along the furniture, they are keen to use this skill to get to things of interest. But sometimes you will see older babies crawling for the sheer joy of moving from place to place. This enthusiastic 'let's do it' is all part of early learning.

Useful publications

Sally Featherstone & Clare Beswick (2003) **Little baby books** series. London: A&C Black (+44 (0) 20 7758 0200).

Sally Featherstone, Liz Williams (2007) **Baby and beyond**. London: A&C Black (+44 (0) 207758 0200).

Jennie Lindon (2006) **Care and caring matter – young children learning through care**. London: Early Education.

Jennie Lindon (2008) **What does it mean to be two?** London: Practical Pre-School Books

Jennie Lindon, Kevin Kelman & Alice Sharp (2008) **Play and learning in the early years: practical activities and games for under 3s**. London: Step Forward Publishing.

Ayala Manolson (1995) **You make the difference in helping your child to learn**. Toronto: The Hanen Centre (distributed in UK by Winslow, 0845 230 2777).

Useful contacts

Family Information Service (FIS) – your local FIS will be able to let you know of services dealing with this subject, whether provided through Sure Start, a children's centre, family centre or other organisation. For details of how to contact your FIS, visit Childcare Link: www.childcarelink.gov.uk

Fathers Direct www.fathersdirect.com

National Family and Parenting Institute www.nfpi.org.uk

Parentline Plus: helpline 0808 800 2222; www.parentlineplus.org.uk

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Learning together series

The Learning together series of leaflets aims to help parents and other caring adults understand children's development, play an active part in their learning and enjoy the children they spend time with. The leaflets cover a wide range of topics, including life with babies and toddlers, children's behaviour, being outdoors, drawing and writing, reading, maths, ICT and equality – and more. The leaflets can be downloaded from the Early Education website www.early-education.org.uk

Early Education promotes the right of all children to education of the highest quality. It provides support, advice and information on best practice for everyone concerned with the education and care of young children from birth to eight.

